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Virtual workshop: Learning from every loss: The role of parliamentarians in improving maternal health in Latin America and the Caribbean

22 June 2022, 10:00 – 11:30 (GMT-4)

REPORT

Speakers (in order of appearance)

Dr. José Ignacio Echániz, Member of Parliament of Spain, Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health
Dr. Bremen De Mucio, Regional Advisor for Sexual and Reproductive Health, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)
Dr. Ignacio Ibarra, Legal Advisor on Health-Related Law, PAHO
Mr. Charles Ngwena, Professor of Law, University of Pretoria
Ms. Cynthia Lopez Castro, Member of Parliament of Mexico
Dr. Allisyn Moran, Head, Maternal Health Unit, World Health Organization

Moderator

Ms. Saraí Núñez Cerón, Member of Parliament of Mexico, Vice-Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health

Introduction

Despite significant global progress, women continue to die during and following pregnancy and childbirth. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the estimated maternal mortality rate is [73 per 100,000 live births](#). Most of these deaths are preventable. A better understanding of the circumstances of each and every maternal death is a crucial step in preventing other women dying the same way. This is the goal of maternal death reporting and review (MDRR), a quality improvement intervention to reduce maternal mortality within a country's overall healthcare system by identifying structural issues and other factors impacting women's well-being and rights.

The virtual workshop held on 22 June 2022 aimed to mobilize parliamentarians in Latin America and the Caribbean to incorporate MDRR in national legal frameworks. The event was attended by 50 participants, including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, government officials, civil society representatives and United Nations representatives.

Opening remarks by the Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health were followed by presentations by speakers from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the University of Pretoria, South Africa. They highlighted the need to accelerate progress on maternal mortality in Latin America and the Caribbean, the importance of MDRR for addressing the root causes of maternal mortality, and the role that legislation can play. A country perspective from Mexico further articulated the equity challenges and complicated factors impacting maternal health. Closing remarks by a speaker from the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized the important role of parliamentarians in improving maternal health and the ongoing collaboration between WHO and the IPU in support of this objective, as part of efforts to achieve universal health coverage (UHC).

Beyond maternal death figures

The presenters highlighted that, although the Latin American and Caribbean region was close to meeting the Sustainable Development Goal global target of 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, it was not on track to reach the additional regional target of 30 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030. According to current projections, annual reduction rates would need to quadruple to reach that goal, requiring policy changes and additional resources at the country level. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal health had not been recognized and addressed in time, with significant setbacks in some countries across the region. Meanwhile, longstanding inequalities persisted, with women from poorer, rural and indigenous communities being at higher risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth.

Speakers affirmed in the strongest terms that knowing the figures was not enough. Identifying and addressing the root causes of each and every maternal death was key. MDRR was an important tool, enabling a standardized and systematic approach to analyzing each death. It enabled the review of clinical factors but also considered cultural norms and other issues such as trust in the health system preventing women from accessing health services.

Simply surviving pregnancy and childbirth could never be the marker of successful maternal health care. In line with the WHO Constitution, health should be defined in a positive way: a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease”. MDRR should therefore be part of a comprehensive approach to women’s empowerment, education and well-being, and linked to efforts to improve access to health through UHC and social security programmes. Disaggregated data was also needed for a better understanding of these causes, providing a critical step to informed action on improving women’s well-being and rights more broadly.

Promoting change through legislation

The virtual workshop explored the role of legislation in promoting maternal health. Although laws did not automatically translate into better health outcomes, legal frameworks were determinants of health and could be protective factors, providing a bridge between the people and their rights.

With regard to MDRR, legislation could contribute to strengthening existing systems by making them mandatory. Crucially, laws could also establish legal protection for health workers participating in the process. The buy-in of all actors concerned was an essential factor for the implementation of legislation. The presenters further highlighted the importance of laws in establishing accountability, for which the oversight role of parliaments was instrumental. Laws needed to be reviewed, and their impact evaluated regularly, so as to address remaining gaps and avoid obsolescence and inconsistency.

Working together for better health outcomes

While MDRR could be seen as a purely technical health tool, the workshop affirmed the critical role of parliamentarians in making it effective, accountable and rights-based. Efforts to join forces across countries and stakeholder groups were urgently needed, and already underway, in particular through a regional interagency task force for the reduction of maternal mortality. PAHO was also actively engaging parliamentarians and regularly bringing together parliamentary health committees from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to address common health challenges. Such mechanisms could contribute to the follow-up to the workshop.

The virtual workshop set a further milestone by serving as a first step in the strengthened cooperation between the IPU, WHO and PAHO on reducing maternal mortality, as part of the 2018 IPU-WHO Memorandum of Understanding. This partnership seeks to support countries in their efforts to improve maternal health and serve as an example for broadening the initiative to other regions.